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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5487  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 3210  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3075  
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY  
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000950

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THE MINI PENSIONER REVOLT OF 2006

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: In January 2006, then President Niyazov enacted pension reform, which left a third of pensioners without a pension and decreased the remaining pensions by 20%. Pensioners in Dashoguz province mobilized to protest these actions and were halted by the government, after a series of protest meetings were held. In May 2006, private copy facilities in the area lost their licenses and their copy machines as a result of printing fliers for pensioners trying to organize the protests. When the copiers were no longer available, pensioners scanned flyers and printed them from computers. It is believed that the ringleaders of the pensioner movement were placed in mental facilities for the aged, although this was never conclusively proven. Employees at the copy stores were instructed by the government to say that all machines were broken and to conceal that they had been removed by order of the government. This incident shows that civil society, ingenuity, and initiative can blossom anywhere there is strong enough motivation, even in Turkmenistan. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) We often think of the Turkmen as a people who accept authority and whatever the top-down bureaucracy throws their way. However, even the Turkmen will stand up when something affects their pocket book. According to one Amcit, who previously was a longtime resident in Dashoguz, such an incident took place in 2006, in response to former President Niyazov's policy that cut pensions.

FACTORS WHICH CONTRIBUTED TO THE MOBILIZATION OF DASHOGUZ PENSIONERS

14. (SBU) In late January 2006, then President Saparmurat Niyazov declared presidential decree No 3939 and articles from presidential decrees No 5567 and No 5882 null and void in a proclaimed attempt at pension reform. Declaring that an internal audit had discovered discrepancies, the President determined that the average state pension would be cut by 20%, while women with less than 20 years work experience and men with less than 25 years would lose their pensions altogether. With this decision, President Niyazov cut the number of eligible pensioners by roughly 33%, leaving over 100,000 elderly citizens with no source of income. Operating under a government-mandated 'voluntary' program, all workers were expected

to contribute 2% of their monthly salaries, with the expectation that they would be able to draw upon this fund at retirement. The 2006 pension reform brought into question the future security and stability of previous and future contributions, while engendering much confusion and apprehension among the populace.

#### DASHOGUZ PENSIONERS' RESPONSE TO GOVERNMENT'S EDICT

¶15. (SBU) The public reaction to these developments was quite restrained at first, as there was a great deal of misinformation and confusion among the general population. People began to feel the affects of the new policy during the spring of 2006 and pensioners within the Dashoguz province began to mobilize. In April and May 2006 pensioner organizers distributed flyers throughout the province calling for clarification and payment of lost or depleted pensions. A series of town hall meetings, with 50 - 70 people in attendance at each one, were held in May of 2006, which drew the notice of the government and were subsequently halted.

#### GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO DASHOGUZ PENSIONERS' ACTIONS

¶16. (SBU) The government's first steps were to prevent any future local meetings and to investigate the organizers behind the grassroots movement. In late May 2006, in conjunction with the local investigations, the government rescinded all private copy facilities' licenses and removed their copy machines from the stores' premises. The government apparently determined that the pensioners' access to copied leaflets and fliers enabled the populace to organize and so removed their ability to obtain copy materials. Although denied access to copy machines, the pensioners

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were not deterred right away. They simply decided to scan leaflets and print them from computers.

¶17. (SBU) Directly following the removal of the copy machines, employees at the copy stores were instructed by the government to say that all machines were broken and to conceal that they had been removed by order of the government. Licenses and equipment were not returned until mid-September 2006, without a clear explanation ever being supplied by the government regarding their initial removal.

¶18. (SBU) Eventually, meetings were no longer held, and the leaders of the pensioner protests disappeared. Local opinion was that the main ringleaders were sent to asylums for the aged, although this was never confirmed. Several organizers did leave the province and did not return.

¶19. (SBU) COMMENT: This incident proves that when there is strong enough motivation (i.e., someone's livelihood) civil society will blossom, even in Turkmenistan. And until the mini pensioner revolt was shut down completely, where there was a will, people found a way (substituting scanned documents and printing them from computers when there were no longer copy machines available.)

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: While the government never explicitly stated why they removed the copy machines and rescinded the private licenses within Dashoguz, the local population strongly believed that it was both a consequence and punishment for the pensioners' mobilization. The removal of local copy machines created numerous difficulties for the local population, as citizens routinely required copies of passports and other official documents. Moreover, the punitive nature of the seizures provoked a general sense of unease and disquiet within the population, stemming any attempts at further grassroots initiatives. As a side note, it is believed that discrepancies within the pension system were caused by governmental embezzlement. These funds have never been recovered, nor any officials officially prosecuted. END COMMENT.

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